

## **Important Nutrition Considerations for Mom's and Children**

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Ensuring that your child gets adequate nutrition is a common concern among most parents. Proper nutritional status starts with the health of the mother during pregnancy and breast feeding. As the child is weaned from the breast, or not breast fed at all, good quality formula and solid food take over as cornerstones of nutrition. Many parents also wonder about vitamins and supplements for children. Which are the most important and in what forms?

In utero, a developing child derives all of its nutritional needs directly from the mother and her stores. As mom is also feeding her own nutritional needs there must be an abundant supply of all nutritional co-factors. The best place to start is with a diet rich in fresh vegetables, fruit and high quality protein. Protein sources like low mercury fish, hormone and antibiotic free chicken and turkey and grass fed beef are all good sources of protein and calories for mom's to be. Vegetables supply the diet with some of the highest amounts of nutrition. For this reason it is important to eat a well balanced amount of vegetables. I recommend that they be cooked in olive oil, as raw can be difficult on an already sometimes touchy digestive system. A recent study in mice showed that babies born to mothers with poor nutrition may have a higher chance of developing diabetes as they get older.

A good diet should also be supplemented with a high quality pre-natal vitamin and omega 3 fatty acids like DHA and EPA. This type of focus on mom's nutrition should be continued throughout breast feeding as mom is still baby's only source of nutrition.

The earliest supplement that should be considered for a baby or child is essential fatty acids, particularly the omega 3's DHA and EPA. DHA is the most important fatty acid for brain and neurological development. A child's neurological system is one of the fastest developing systems in the entire body and must be properly supported. The American diet is virtually devoid of these life giving oils. Even if one eats fish, the most abundant source of omega 3's, there is no guarantee that it will be adequate. For instance, if the fish is farm raised vs. wild it will contain none of these beneficial oils. On the other hand, fish high in Omega 3's like tuna can have problems with pesticide or mercury contamination and should not be consumed in high amounts during pregnancy or lactation. Salmon and sardines are two sources of wild fish typically low in contamination and high in omega 3's. Other foods high in Omega 3's are grass fed beef, and wild game like venison.

For all these reasons, I do suggest most women supplement with a high quality omega 3 during pregnancy and lactation. If a child is primarily on formula it is important to select one with DHA or add adequate amounts to the mixture. Before taking any supplements, pregnant women should consult with a qualified health care practitioner trained in the field of nutrition. Omega 3 supplementation for children should be continued throughout development all the way into adulthood. Numerous studies have shown its beneficial effects on conditions ranging from ADD/ADHD, depression, anxiety, heart disease and obesity.

Other important supplements to consider at an early age are pro-biotics. The gastrointestinal tract is an ecosystem composed of millions of micro-organisms. During the early part of life it is imperative to start the ecosystem out with the correct cultures.

Numerous studies over the last 10-15 years have shown the clear benefits of pro-biotic supplementation in children particularly when dealing with allergic conditions. Skin conditions like atopic dermatitis respond extremely well to probiotic supplementation. Other allergy related illnesses like asthma have also shown improvement with pro-biotic therapy. If the proper pro-biotic is used, supplementation can begin right after birth. This should be especially considered if the baby was delivered via C-section. The microflora of the vaginal canal is predominantly composed of lactobacillus and acidophilus, the same micro-organisms that should be predominant in the GI system. During a vaginal birth, the baby should be exposed and inoculated with these organisms. In a C-section the baby does not pass through the vaginal canal and therefore does not get the proper inoculation. There are specific pro-biotic supplements formulated for infants.

As the child moves into the toddler stages a good quality multi-vitamin should be considered. It is important to pick supplements that are of high quality and not loaded with sugar and artificial colors and sweeteners. Chewable forms are usually the preferred type, but the best is often a liquid. Liquid allows for optimal absorption and can easily be made palatable without high amounts of sugar. Further, liquids can be added to juices or other drinks to mask the taste and present no choking hazards for younger ones. The most common deficiency of any vitamin or nutrient in children and teenagers is iron. For this reason a multi should be selected that has adequate iron levels.

Another thing to consider when wondering about nutrition is diet. My best advice is to remember what your grandmother told you and “always eat your vegetables”. The problem is that most children do not like their vegetables. Food preferences and eating patterns start at a very young age. It is important that the first solid foods your child be exposed to are vegetables. Once the palate is trained towards things that are sweet (cereals and sweet fruit) it is very hard to introduce the more bland and sometimes bitter vegetables. Good ways to start is with a not great tasting veggie, like broccoli and mix it with something that tastes better like carrots, butternut squash or peas. Many of these combinations can be found in pre-made baby foods or a small hand held device can be employed to make baby food after the vegetables are adequately cooked. If the focus of the diet is continually emphasized around vegetables that is what the child will learn to eat and enjoy. It is also important to minimize exposure to high carbohydrate refined grains like cereals and pasta, and other processed foods that contain high amounts of sugar. Keep all high fructose corn syrup and candy out of a child’s diet for as long as possible.

The eating habits established at a young age will help ensure that your child continues to maintain adequate nutrition throughout the rest of his or her life. Further, we now know the importance of healthy eating and its role in health problems like diabetes, heart disease and cancer. The extra efforts necessary to establish these principles will benefit your child for the rest of their lives.